



Testimony Submitted to:
Vermont Senate Judiciary Committee

Becca Zipkin, Policy Director
World Without Exploitation

Dear Chairman Hashim, Vice Chair Norris, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Becca Zipkin, and I am the Policy Director at World Without Exploitation, the largest national anti-trafficking coalition in the country. WorldWE represents over 200 member-based organizations, many of which are survivor-led. We are guided by survivors of the commercial sex trade, whose perspectives are critical in developing just and effective policy. Today, I want to highlight the link between systems of sex trafficking and prostitution.

The global sex trade thrives on the exploitation of vulnerable women and children by sex buyers, often wealthy men who reinforce coercion through power imbalances. Sex trafficking and prostitution are inextricably linked systems that exist to meet this demand. These forms of commercial sexual exploitation are human rights issues, fueled by gender, racial, and economic inequalities. Oftentimes, these men are not just seeking sex—they crave power, leading many to resort to extreme violence. A 2024 study conducted by leading experts on prostitution reported that 98% of prostituted women had been raped by sex buyers or pimps.¹ A Colorado medical study found that 92% of women in the sex trade report having been raped, shot, strangled, burned, beaten, stabbed, or punched.² You cannot escape the violence here.

We know from research and working with survivors that decriminalizing prostitution in Vermont would be detrimental—this will only increase the demand for prostitution, driving the trafficking of marginalized girls and women to sustain it. Take Rhode Island as an example. From 1980 to 2009, indoor prostitution was legal, leading to increased violence, exploitation, and trafficking. Providence became known as the “red light district” of New England, and even the mayor called it a “true wild west.”³⁴ Law enforcement couldn’t stop pimps or traffickers, and the state became a destination for sex tourism. We must ask ourselves: Do we want Vermont to become the next red light district?

In this national moment of reckoning—when the country is confronting the reality of how Jeffrey Epstein trafficked women and girls to powerful men who treated them as commodities—it is not the time to normalize or decriminalize the purchase of vulnerable people for sex. The lessons emerging from these revelations are clear: exploitation thrives when those with power and resources are shielded from accountability. Efforts to fully

¹ Melissa Farley and M. Alexis Kennedy, “Torture and Its Sequelae Among Prostituted Women in the United States,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 15, no. 1 (2024): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008066.2024.2404307>.

² Jody Raphael and Katie Feifer, *Get the Facts: What We Know About Sex Trafficking, Sexual Exploitation, and Prostitution in the United States* (World Without Exploitation, January 2020), originally published February 2017, <https://www.equalitymodelus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Get-the-Facts-January-2020.pdf>.

³ W. Zachary Malinowski, *Sex Industry Expands at Startling Pace*, PROVIDENCE J., Apr. 23, 2002, at A1.

⁴ David N. Cicilline, *Time to End Legalized Prostitution in R.I.*, PROVIDENCE J., May 19, 2009, at Commentary 6.

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decriminalize the sex trade are often framed as protective or progressive, but they risk obscuring a harsher truth. Removing consequences for buyers does not protect the vulnerable; it expands the market that preys upon them. At its core, this is not about empowerment or choice—it is about demand, and the systems that enable that demand to exploit those with the fewest options.

This is why we at WorldWE support the Survivor Model. This legislative framework decriminalizes people being bought and sold, prioritizes services and support instead of arrest, and holds the people causing harm, such as exploiters and sex buyers, accountable. Maine became the first state to pass this framework in 2023, and Vermont's neighboring state, New Hampshire, passed a law in 2025 that adds additional fines for sex buyers while allocating those fines to fund survivor resources.⁵

I am happy to connect to discuss the issue of demand and the Survivor Model further in detail. Thank you all for your time.

Thank you,
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⁵ New Hampshire Senate Bill 267, "An Act relative to the penalty for engaging in prostitution as a patron," 2025 Reg. Sess., signed July 29, 2025, <https://legiscan.com/NH/text/SB267/id/3075749>